


Building skills in technology

“By building skills in technology creation, people can develop innovative solutions to community and economic problems and empower themselves to explore their full potential.”

- Regina Agyare

A Tech Needs Girls volunteer conducts a  lesson in writing computer code with girls in Accra. Credit: R. Agyare

Software developer Regina Agyare believes Information Technology (IT) can drive significant social change. A 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow, Agyare helped launch the U.N.-related project Tech Needs Girls in Ghana. Her own company, Soronko Solutions, uses information technology to develop solutions allowing clients to reach their potential.

YALI Network Question: How does IT promote human potential?

Agyare: Technology is a tool and an enabler to help people take an idea or solution from inception to execution. IT can help your idea leapfrog infrastructure gaps and impact a large number of people. By building skills in technology creation, people can develop innovative solutions to community and economic problems and empower themselves to explore their full potential.

Question: Describe Soronko’s efforts to pursue those goals with girls in Ghana.

Agyare: Ghanaian women and girls are lagging behind in developing IT skills. At Soronko we run a project called Tech Needs Girls, which is a mentorship program where we teach girls between the ages of 6 and 18 years old how to code and create with IT tools. The girls are trained by young female mentors who study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in the university. They use a unique curriculum, which makes coding fun and allows for creativity and problem solving.

Some of the girls in these programs are from slum communities and could be forced into early marriage. By teaching them coding skills, we hope to help them empower themselves economically and continue their education.

Q: Have the newly trained girls been able to move into jobs?

Agyare: Tech Needs Girls alumnae are currently doing internships at the biggest software company in Ghana, called Rancard Solutions.

Q: What has Soronko Solutions accomplished in helping Ghanaian businesses better use technology to expand?

Agyare: At Soronko Solutions, we believe in using technology to help Ghanaian businesses grow and gain visibility. We have built services to help a wide range of clients automate processes to make business operations more efficient, increase turnover and bring their services to the customer’s

doorstep.

Q: How does someone begin to work with or for Soronko?

Agyare: It is very accessible to work with Soronko. We are always looking for young individuals who are passionate about using technology to drive small businesses or promote social change. We also offer internships and sponsor clubs in the university where we train young women in STEM fields and prepare them for the job market or starting their own business.

Q: Soronko is working like some corporate and nonprofit hubs in the larger IT community that launch further waves of innovation in the communities surrounding them. How does that work?

Agyare: Innovation hubs are very important because they provide the space, training, skills development and inspiration to unlock the creative potential in our youth. They also allow for collaboration and for individuals with different skills and abilities to integrate their talents to solve community problems and develop themselves.

Q: What can YALI Network members do to start a hub in a community?

Agyare: The first thing would be to get a space to house hub activities. If one does not have access to a space, the next best thing is to create a virtual hub. That's an online community of people where knowledge is shared, innovation is encouraged and interactivity is expected. Hub members can meet regularly in open spaces or use community resources and spaces.

Q: Can their facilities also be meeting and networking spaces?

Agyare: Definitely, hub facilities can be meeting and networking spaces. It is actually important for the ecosystem and the success of hubs that meetings and networking among the members is encouraged.

Q: Are innovation hubs emerging in more places in Africa?

Agyare: Yes, and they are needed to address issues like Africa's huge unemployment problem and to engage young people to become innovative change-makers and problem solvers.

Lukonga Lindunda, a Mandela Washington Fellowship alumus, provided [this interactive map](#) of innovation hubs around Africa. Read more about [Lindunda](#) and [BongoHive](#), the innovation hub he co-founded in Zambia.

[Building a Culture of Production](#)

Fresh Views on Leadership

“Leaders who operate at their best bring the best to their team.”

“Leaders need to carry a deep sense of meaning, purpose and intent about why they do what they do. People are excited to work for a leader with purpose. Leaders who operate at their best bring the best to their team,” says leadership expert Kai Grünewald.

Yale leadership trainer Kai Grünewald

Credit: Courtesy of Kai Grünewald



Grünewald is co-founder of the Boston-based management consulting firm Aberkyn. He began his business career at age 22 when he took over his family’s metals and plastics firm. Grünewald shared some his views of leadership with a group of young African leaders studying business and entrepreneurship at Yale University during the summer of 2014. Here are some of his messages:

Deal with Upsets

- Sometimes we are confronted with upsets. But every upset has meaning and is a step in preparing you to become a stronger person. You have the ability to reframe an upsetting episode. Ask yourself: What can I learn from this? What has been my part in creating this upset? Rather than being a victim of your circumstances, you become creative in your response to what is happening. You reframe the situation.

- If you feel agitated, learn to pause in the moment, count to 10, then ask yourself: What do I want to happen?

Manage Your Fears

- Some fears shared by many people include fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of hurting others, and fear that you don’t matter. That’s why people hold back, put up shields and don’t open up. Communication breaks down. Step out of that defensive crouch and step into your powerful selves. That liberates you.

- Make a list of your fears. Then find other people with the same fears. It’s a relief to realize that you are not the only one suffering from those fears.

Forge Trust

- Learn what other members of your team value. The effort will lead to greater understanding by

you and will instill trust in others.

- Clarify your expectations and deliver on promises. Be honest about your limitations.
- Withhold judgment and criticism. Separate the person from performance.

Create Time to Recharge


- Balance your energy by maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle.
- Seek out conversations with coworkers so you can hear something new.
- Reach out to friends regularly and send notes that compliment, thank or praise others.
- Each day, look around and meditate on nature. Take a few minutes to concentrate just on breathing.

Grünewald advises young African leaders to develop a sincere intention for what they would like to gain by participating in YALI. “Be aware of your personal strengths and act on them,” he says.

More information about [Aberkyn](#) is on the firm’s Web page.

Get Started with This Simple Business Plan

A business plan can help you manage your business and deal with change as you remain focused on short- and long-term goals.

Keep records of your business goals and  results.

Credit: © AP Images

First, settle on strategy. Match your product line with your strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and what your target market wants most.

Write down key points so you can refer back to them in the future. Don’t try to do everything at once, but rather focus on what’s most important as the days unfold.

Then create the action plan.

Think of the action plan as a solid strategy with measurable specifics that make the strategy happen. Don’t worry about your writing style or formatting; just get the specifics down.

1. Create a review schedule. Schedule something periodically — every third Thursday of the

month, for example — for a short review of the plan, actual results and the fine-tuning required to keep the plan alive and relevant.

2. List your assumptions. Go over your initial assumptions to identify potential significant changes. When you find that your initial assumptions were incorrect or circumstances have changed, evaluate whether you will adhere to the plan or revise it.

3. Identify milestones. These are specific dates, deadlines and responsibilities. Make a list of who is supposed to do what, when it should be done, and how much it costs. Estimate the amount of revenue each activity is supposed to generate.

4. Estimate the basic numbers. You must make basic estimates of expenses and profits to follow your plan. For most companies, that means projected sales, cost of sales, expenses, profits and cash flow. Use a basic projected balance sheet of your assets and liabilities. Think of other relevant measurements to track, like units produced or presentations made. Keep a log, or, if possible, enter this information on a computer so you can refer back to it to see what has changed. You also may need to show the information to others, like investors.

Now that you have a plan in practical form, make sure to stick to the review schedule and look at the difference between the plan and the actual details of your unfolding enterprise. This will help keep the plan alive.

Yali.state.gov is focusing on entrepreneurs and their issues through the month of November in recognition of the [Global Entrepreneurship Summit](#) held in Marrakech November 18-21, jointly sponsored by the governments of Morocco and the United States.

Adapted from material published by the U.S. [Small Business Administration](#).

Entrepreneurs: Be Willing to Constantly Learn

“As a business owner, you can choose who you work with, what you work on and how you do it.”

How do you start a business, locate funding or deal with challenges as a young entrepreneur? Sheena Lindahl, founder and CEO of [Empact](#), shares inspiring advice with the YALI Network.

How to GET STARTED

What should a business plan contain?

Lindahl: If you need a business plan to get financing or for some other purpose, you may want to use a business plan template. To find one, go to Google and search “business plan template.”

State what you want to sell, who you will sell it to, how much it will cost to get started and how you will market your product or service. Don't try to write a perfect plan.

I always think that it's better to start tomorrow. How can I get past that?

Lindahl: Take one action a day to move forward. First, write down your idea. Next, determine your costs. Ask three people how much they would pay if you could deliver your service or product. Make a test piece to see how long it takes to make. Make each step as specific and actionable as possible.

I have a supply company. Should I specialize in selling one specific product or be more general?

Lindahl: The more specialized you are, the better the business does. You become known for that thing, so whenever someone has the need, they know to come to you. And with limited funds, it's hard to invest in many areas.

Does an entrepreneurship education give you more chances of succeeding in business?

Lindahl: The more you educate yourself, the better your chances of success. However, that education does not have to come from a classroom. It is a combination of taking in information and taking action on that information to gain experience. Entrepreneurs have to be willing to constantly learn and apply that learning to their experience.

How to LOCATE FUNDING

Access to financing for young entrepreneurs remains a challenge. How can we work around this?

Lindahl: There are the traditional routes – debt financing through banks, and equity financing through venture capital or angel investors. Explore www.vc4africa.biz.

If these routes do not work, scale down your idea or pivot to something that requires less startup capital. For example, an entrepreneur wanted to build energy-efficient housing, but could not get funding. So he started doing energy audits on existing housing. That business became a success.

Also, look at the assets you do have, like your own knowledge and skills.

I am trying to set up a refrigerated food preservation company. The banks love the idea but say they don't finance startups. How can I find funding?

Lindahl: Remove some of the risk they see. Start the business on a smaller scale. Ask family and friends to invest in a piece of equipment. Use that to show the bank how profitable it would be if you had more equipment. Prove that you know how to get customers and manage money. Ask future customers to invest in the business. Look to www.vc4africa.biz to find angel investors.

How to DEAL WITH CHALLENGES

Is it necessary to continue your studies or stop studies to start looking for money for a business?

Lindahl: Don't quit a job or studies to launch a business unless you are at a point where the business can support you.

I am in a partnership and seem to be the only one interested in getting the business going. How do I deal with the other party?

Lindahl: Talk to your partner. If the person is not interested in running the business, maybe he or she would be willing to walk away and let you do it on your own. If they can't invest the same amount of time or money as you, discuss ways to share ownership of the company.

What are the pros and cons of owning a business?

Lindahl: As a business owner, you can choose who you work with, what you work on and how you do it. But you also have the ultimate responsibility. If things go well, you get the credit. But when challenges arise, it is up to you to solve them or find the answers.


If growth and making a contribution to your community drive you, the extra responsibility of being an entrepreneur will be worth more than the comfort of a corporate job.

These are excerpts from our #YALICHAT with Sheena Lindahl. Find her complete answers on our Facebook page: [on her background](#), on [tips for beginning a business](#), and on the [challenges of women entrepreneurs](#).

You might also be interested in other "[Business and Entrepreneurship](#)" blog posts at [yali.state.gov](#).

Using Social Media to Grow Your Business

Social media offer businesses a variety of tools to inform existing customers, connect with new ones, raise awareness about products and services and reach new customers and markets.

Monif Clarke uses a social media strategy to promote 
sales for her specialty women's clothing company in New York City.

Credit: AP Images

You may have built a website to create an online presence for your business and serve as a platform for sales. It's like a reference book for your business, but a social media presence should be more like a conversation with customers.

Using both forms of online communication strategically can increase your sales and customer base.

Here are a few tips on using social media sites to promote your business:

Be Brief

Social media content must be short. Strive to be concise, and do not try to say everything at once.

Schedule your posts over the course of a day or week, focusing on one key message per post. Customers are more likely to read and remember short, focused messages rather than long, rambling ones.

Be Fresh

Stand out from the continuous stream of social media content by posting timely, eye-catching content. Use images and videos whenever possible, and be sure to post frequently. Staying fresh in the minds of your followers will increase the chances they will choose your products or services.

Be Personal

Social media can give your business a personal voice. Welcome new followers with a casual and friendly tone. Offer exclusive online promotions to these customers.

Be Interactive

Keep your followers engaged by posting articles, links and other content they will find interesting.

Encourage interaction by asking questions and running contests. If you own a restaurant, for instance, ask your followers to name a new menu item. If you sell kitchen equipment, ask people to post their favorite recipes.

Be Responsive

Listen to what customers are saying, so they'll know they're in a conversation. Ask for feedback. Reply to messages and comments. Acknowledge criticism and take steps to address complaints and suggestions.

Be Purposeful

Do your research. Familiarize yourself with the rules of each social media platform and select one that allows you to address customers in a way that's appropriate for you.

Identify the social networks that are most popular with your target customers. Look for a network that gives you access to a population you had not considered before. Invest your time in those that offer the best opportunities for growth.

This article is adapted and condensed from a longer version available on the State Department's [public diplomacy website](#).

During the month of November, the YALI Network will focus on the topic of entrepreneurship, in recognition of the [Global Entrepreneurship Summit](#) to held in Morocco November 19-21.

South African Designer Makes Casual, Trendy Clothes with Military Look

"Love what you do. Having a passion for the business can go a long way when overcoming obstacles."

Models wore LEGION fashions at a recent hip-hop  festival in KwaMakhutha Township, South Africa.

Credit: LEGION Fashions

Fashion is a fickle industry, but a designer in KwaMakhutha Township, South Africa, has created an urban, casual and trendy look that she hopes will become fashion cool for young men.

LEGION fashions is a menswear brand based in Durban, South Africa, owned by designer Nandipha Gaelesiwe, a member of the YALI Network. She is getting the company started as she completes a degree in clothing at the Durban University of Technology.

Could you describe your business to the YALI Network?

Gaelesiwe: LEGION produces men's garments with a military-influenced look, but with a design and fit that set them apart. My motto is "Camouflage is not only for combat." I want to produce designs that show the versatility of camouflage prints from traditional to modern. I also want a brand influenced by my own experience and by the urban hip-hop lifestyle.

What is distinctive about LEGION products?

Gaelesiwe: The styling and cut of LEGION products are distinctive. The camouflage print represents the brand and sets it apart from other products on the market. The garments break away from a traditional loose fit. They have a tailored style that lies smooth against the body while still maintaining ease of movement.

The South African fashion market has very few locally produced and developed urban brands catering towards the hip-hop community. This is a growing sector in South Africa's entertainment industry, but most artists are wearing international brands. LEGION aims to promote a South African brand in the hip-hop community.

How close are you to getting there?

Gaelesiwe: I've been finishing my degree, learning all the things that are going to help me achieve these goals.

LEGION started as a brand in 2013 with my output based on a custom-order for each client, but I

plan to scale up the business soon. I need to find a space with greater production capacity, to give room to all the sewing equipment and workspace necessary. I'm also looking for textile companies that will serve as suppliers of fabric and will custom-design prints for me.

You're doing online sales now. Do you plan to open a storefront?

Gaelesawe: Currently, LEGION is selling through social media sites online and also personal selling methods. Future plans are to open storefronts in Durban and Johannesburg. Both of these cities are hubs to my market and are growing fashion capitals in South Africa.

What obstacles have you faced in your startup, and how have you overcome them?

Gaelesawe: I'm still dealing with these obstacles daily. The biggest issue is finding capital to finance the business. I do not have enough resources at the moment. I'm looking at different avenues of finance that might be available through government assistance and programmes for up-and-coming designers.

Marketing the business as a startup is also challenging. But I'm trying to be proactive, targeting local hip-hop artists to wear my clothing so that it can become more recognized. I'm also finding opportunities to showcase LEGION products at events like hip-hop festivals.

What advice do you offer others wanting to start a business?

1. Love what you do. Having a passion for the business can go a long way when overcoming obstacles.
2. Make long-term goals.
3. Believe in yourself and be open to learn something new.

(LEGION Communications Director Nkosinathi Mkhize, also a member of the YALI Network, contributed to this article.)

Need-to-Knows for Start-Ups

U.S. entrepreneurs with a few years of successful growth answer the question, **"What do you wish you knew when you began your business?"**

A group of young African entrepreneurs 

Credit: AP Images

No One is Good at Everything

“There will always be tasks that you don’t have the skills to complete, and it’s okay to outsource those. It’s better to spend some money on an accountant than to try to learn payroll.” – Liam Martin, [Staff.com](#), an online staffing agency connecting employers and employees.

Organization Is Key

“As we become a larger company, we are realizing how chaotic it is to manage all the paperwork. I never like to delete stuff in case we need it in the future. Nevertheless, it became severely overwhelming and made us inefficient, so we decided to invest in ... a high-speed scanner, and interns to help us organize and digitize everything. It was worth the time and money.” – Derek Capo, [Next Step China](#), a Miami-based firm that offers affordable and flexible programs in China for students, professionals and government officials.

People Talk a Big Game

“You learn to filter through the “talkers” and the “doers” so you end up working with people who are exceptionally good at what they do.” – Danny Wong, [Blank Label](#), a Boston-based online men’s apparel company.

Write Down Reliable Processes

“You start up with so much energy, so many ideas and endless possibilities. You quickly maneuver and start to grow.... However, nobody told me how incredibly important it is to implement reliable and repeatable processes. You should write everything down and take note when something goes well.” – Arjun Arora, [ReTargeter](#), a display advertising platform specializing in audience targeting and retargeting.

The Vision Will Change

“My co-founder and I started with a very strong, clear vision of what we wanted our business to become. That vision shifted over time as new opportunities arose.... Initially, I resisted changing course because I felt like we were giving up on our vision. But eventually, I realized we were creating a better, much bigger business than we originally imagined.” – Martina Welke, [Zealyst](#), a Seattle-based networking service that hosts customized events and facilitates connections

Lead From Love

“Once I discovered how to lead from a place of love and gratitude, the landscape of (my company) changed. We started attracting a higher caliber of clientele, our quality improved, our processes improved and overall our company was infused with more joy.” — [Corey Blake](#), [Round Table Companies](#), a business consultancy in Evanston, Illinois.

Work Smart, Not Hard

“In the beginning, I thought I was being effective by simply working 80 hours a week. That couldn’t be further from the truth. The adept startup owner should instead focus on ways to get things done effectively in a shorter period of time.” — [Andrew Schrage](#), [Money Crashers Personal Finance](#), a Chicago-based online site that teaches individuals about credit and debt, investing, education, real

estate, insurance, spending, and more.

Clients Don't Always Pay on Time


"If you work with clients, it's not a question of if they will pay late, but a question of when. Create a cash buffer as soon as humanly possible so you're not left scrambling when a check comes late [payment is behind schedule] or gets lost in the mail [disappears in the post]."- [Allie Siarto](#), [Fare Oak](#), a Michigan-based online women's fashion store.

People Are Complex Creatures

"The bulk of your time with an early startup is focused on building your team and supporting them to be great. That means you are part recruiter, part coach, part psychiatrist and part referee. But if you love helping people be great, it's an awesome experience."- [Eric Koester](#), Data Collateral, Inc., a Washington-based business consultancy.

Adapted from an article published online by The Young Entrepreneur Council (YEC), an invite-only organization comprised of promising young entrepreneurs. In partnership with Citi, [YEC](#) recently launched StartupCollective, a free virtual mentorship program that helps millions of entrepreneurs start and grow businesses.

Location Is Vital for a New Business

Mandela Washington Fellow Hetiarivony 

Rabetsimamanga of Madagascar teaches young entrepreneurs marketing, which includes determining where to locate a business like this hat stall.

Credit: Hetiarivony Rabetsimamanga

Choosing a business location is one of the most important decisions a startup will make. The choice requires solid research and precise planning. Before deciding on a location, talk to building co-tenants or other business owners in the area.

And consider these other location factors:

1. **Exposure:** Choose a location that provides ample exposure to your customers.
2. **Image:** Is the location consistent with the image you want to maintain?
3. **Competition:** Are the businesses around you complementary or competing? Which areas are your competitors ignoring?

4. **Local labor market:** Does the area have potential employees with the skills you need or the ability to be trained?
5. **Your plans for growth:** If you anticipate the business will grow, look for a building that has the space you may need.
6. **Proximity to suppliers:** They need to be able to deliver your supplies.
7. **Safety:** Will customers — or employees — feel safe in the building or traveling between their homes and your business?
8. **Laws and regulations:** Local authorities may have rules about what kind of business can operate in specific locations.

You also need to consider financial variables that could affect your business:


1. **Hidden costs:** Very few spaces are business-ready. Include costs like renovation, decorating, information technology system upgrades, etc.
2. **Taxes:** What are the tax rates for your area? Could you pay less in taxes by locating your business in a nearby area?
3. **Wages:** What is the prevailing fair wage rate in your area? You will get the best employees if you offer fair wages.
4. **Government incentives:** Your business type or location can determine whether you qualify for a government business incentive program.

Always consult with a small business specialist or counselor familiar with local circumstances to help you answer any questions you may have about where to launch your business before you make any final decisions.

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Adapted from material published by the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#).


Lessons for Aspiring Young Entrepreneurs

Photo Courtesy 
Sheena Lindahl

By: Sheena Lindahl, co-founder and CEO of [Empact](#)

Join Sheena Lindahl for a Facebook #YALICHAT starting Tuesday, November 18. You can submit your questions until Thursday, November 20. Post your questions on Facebook or tweet your questions to @YALINetwork and include #YALICHAT. Tuesday-Thursday, November 18-20.

Most entrepreneurs have few resources when they begin. They do not have a lot of money, experience, education or networks but they launch and grow their businesses anyway. I saw this firsthand in September when I met young entrepreneurs in Ghana. The challenges and experiences they described to me were not all the same as those faced by other entrepreneurs. I have learned that no matter where you live, it is how people react to their challenges that makes all the difference in their success.

Sheena Lindahl with group of young  entrepreneurs during her visit to the U.S. Embassy in Ghana. Photo courtesy Sheena Lindahl.

These are some tips I shared with aspiring Ghanaians:

Break a big idea into a smaller idea to start. Most people launching their first company do not have the funding or skills to start the next WhatsApp. I met an inspiring young entrepreneur in Tamale, Ghana, who was running a clothing store. He started with a single pair of sneakers — no store, no inventory, no funding — just one lone pair of sneakers. He sold those and used his profit to buy two more pairs. Then he branched out and included other products. He kept reinvesting his profits until he had enough to fund inventory, space and people to work for him. Starting small is often far less risky and a more certain path to success than waiting for an investor.

Tomorrow will not be a better day to start. Many entrepreneurs wait for what they think are perfect conditions to start their businesses. Very rarely will the perfect time arrive. Instead, entrepreneurs get their businesses off the ground by taking action today to move forward. By taking even small actions they take control and make their own favorable conditions.

Identify your assets and start from there. Focus on what you do have and not what you don't. We worry about our assets, our ideas or what the critics might say. You cannot control someone else's actions or thoughts. You cannot control what challenges you're starting with.

Focus your efforts on what you can control. Entrepreneurs focus on what they can control. If you don't have money to launch, maybe you have a network of friends and family who will be your first customers. You may have an uncle who understands the process of exporting or a financially savvy aunt who can help you think through your plan. Your own skill set — whether it includes photography or carpentry — will also benefit your business. Networks and skills are assets as valuable as investment dollars. By focusing on what you do have and where you have control, you have all you need to take your first steps.

Sheena is president and co-founder of Empact, an organization that has held events bringing top

young entrepreneurs to college campuses, including the [Empact Showcase](#), a celebration of young entrepreneurs with recognition events held at the White House, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the United Nations.

The views and opinions expressed here belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the YALI Network or the U.S. government.
